

Prototyping an Academic Network: People, Places and Connections. Three Years of the Spanish Network for Science and Technology Studies

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How would an academic association look that doesn't have the characteristics of a "typical association"? Which members would form the association? Which places would be its sites of action? These are a few questions that, at least partially, describe the developing process of the Spanish Network for Science and Technology Studies (Red eSCTS) since its launch in 2010. The very name of a "network" (instead of association) points to a first main goal: to explore a new modality of academic relation.

Indeed, the main goal of the network is to promote a stable and fluid network of collaboration and dialogue between STS researchers in Spain and abroad. This is accompanied by a more ambitious idea of providing a space that will allow the collective imagining of new ways of collaborating and researching in an academic and research environment in turmoil.

A second aim has to do with the openness and composition of the network. Some of us wonder whether the network could be composed not only of academics, but be open to other social actors. Some of us have started to play with the idea, thinking how we could broaden the academic dialogue to include new social actors. In that sense, we like to consider this process as an experiment of prototyping a modality of academic formal association.

But, before setting this argument we want to offer some reflections on the process of development of the Spanish Network for Science and Technology Studies (Red eSCTS). For that, in the next sections, we will explicitly refer to the "connections", "places" and "people" that shape the network.

Connections. The network grew out from the very fragmented situation of STS studies in Spain, located either within departments of Philosophy or Social Psychology or pursued by single individuals. To the best of our knowledge, there are only two masters programmes that *explicitly* provide a specific training in the field, namely the

*Master in Science, Technology and Society*¹ (organized by the University of Salamanca and the University of Oviedo) and the *Postgraduate course in STS*² (organized by the STS department at the Philosophy Institute at CSIC), and they stand as the exceptions to the norm. Within this context in 2011, a year after the launch of the network, there was a shared feeling among many participants that the Spanish STS network (Red eSCTS) stood at a crucial point. It was a crucial moment for several reasons, some related to the internal development of the network and others related to the overall situation of academic research and science policy in Spain. The context for the network inception was also crucial because of the dramatic changes in the scientific and academic environment in Spain, which have been recently characterized by massive cuts on public funds to public research, by the drastic reduction (or altogether elimination) of doctoral and post-doctoral grants, the interruption of turnover in public jobs and salary cuts to public employees.³

The network expanded rapidly to include more than 140 members (last checked in February 2013) and has spread across different institutions, fields and research groups in Spain and abroad. At the same time, the network has consolidated its day-to-day activities thanks to digital technologies (an active Google-groups space, a Facebook page and a not so buzzy blog⁴). We had an intense debate during the second meeting of the network about the kind of digital infrastructure that the network should use. Some participants strongly argued for abandoning the afore-mentioned technologies and advocated in favor of using free

¹ <http://mastercts.usal.es>

² <http://www.cchs.csic.es/es/content/cursoscts>

³ <http://www.nature.com/news/spanish-changes-are-scientific-suicide-1.10027>

⁴ Mail group:

<<https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups#!forum/sts-espana>> ; Facebook website:

<<https://www.facebook.com/groups/263816193653962>> Blog: <<http://redescts.wordpress.com>>.

software technologies as an exercise of technological autonomy. At present, these digital infrastructures are in use but the debate has not been closed and is expected to be raised again.

Places. Two meetings have been held and a third one will take place in Barcelona in June 2013⁵ (on that more below). The meetings have been a central element in the configuration of the network and its sensibility, as we have promoted experimentation with different formats in these encounters. During recent years there has been an explosion of experiments with what could be dubbed “methodologies of the encounter”. PechaKucha⁶ and unconferences⁷ are innovative methodologies for meeting, sharing and discussing that aim at thinking and practicing new ways for organizing and producing and putting knowledge in circulation. Drawing inspiration from these methodologies we have opened up calls for new formats in our meetings, trying to follow up this path of experimentation. Sadly, we never received more than one or two proposals and it probably points out to the difficulties of creating new ways of academic exchange. In spite of the lack of success in previous meetings, the space for this kind of innovation is still open for exploration.

One of the main concerns, in the configuration of the meetings, has been, however, the place. We have consciously opted for non-academic spaces as venues for the meetings. The first one, in 2011 was held in the cultural institution Medialab-Prado (Madrid), a centre that works in the intersection of art, science and technology. The second one was also meant to be held in a similar venue in Gijón, in northern Spain, although it was finally celebrated in a different cultural centre. The next meeting in Barcelona will probably be held, at least in part, in Can Batlló⁸, a civic centre run by residents of the Bordeta neighbourhood, after squatting the long abandoned factory Batlló. In many ways, these are places that reconfigure the boundaries between experts and non-experts.

There is a growing literature in our field showing the relevance of places for and of science, casting light on the complex dynamics between the organization of space and the

production of knowledge. Behind the selection of the spaces, we try to explore what it means for an academic association to be emplaced in a non-academic space. What opportunities does it offer to interact with other actors? Is the location of encounters in non-academic venues a potential strategy to open up the network to other relevant non-academic actors? Could we make of the selection of place a manifesto of the academic sensibility that the network is trying to embody? Surely, some of us believe, the geography that the network is making visible could be one of its most singular and distinctive properties.

People. The network works as a non-collegiate group of STS researches. There is no formal membership and there is no formal and permanent structure either. This also means that this review is not representative of the network as such as we are not representatives of it. On the contrary, this is a personal view of the authors that, most likely, is not shared by everybody. We have tried to maintain a loose structure assuming the risk of fading silently away. Who is then part of the network? Whoever participates in its different instances in which the network is brought into life: meetings, virtual spaces of interaction, and so on.

The meetings. The topic for the next meeting in Barcelona 19-21 June 2013, clearly defines the effort to open the network: “**What if I don’t buy it? Unmaking and remaking common worlds**”. It tries to problematize the insistent reminder that we are in crisis, and make visible that this has not generated passivity or inaction but, on the contrary, an enormous proliferation of reactions. Through growing collective agitation new proposals and actions seeking to revitalize the common world are gushing forth, be they proposals to transform expertise or to generate new citizen responses creating new experimental objects, new methodologies and proposals of collective designs... So, we are in crisis, but wait... What if I don’t buy it?

The third encounter follows the previous one celebrated in Gijón, north of Spain, under the slogan “**Between Disillusion and Hope**”⁹. The title was not exactly a guiding topic for the presenters but a slogan that exposed a pressing issue that researchers were facing during 2011 and 2012 in Spain and, certainly, many other countries in the world. You didn’t need to work hard to find disappointment everywhere. Many of us – young

⁵ More information about the setting up of the network and the first meeting are available in a 2011 issue of the EASST Review “Making Visible the Invisible” STS Field in Spain” (vol. 30, No.3, 2011).

⁶ <http://www.pechakucha.org/>

⁷ <http://www.unconference.net/>

⁸ <http://canbatllo.wordpress.com/>

⁹ <http://redescts.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/cfp-2nd-meeting-sts-in-spain-essts-network>

researchers, or not-so-young junior researchers—saw our academic careers truncated thanks to the amputating budget cuts by the Spanish Government. Beyond career dramas, many of us were restless witnesses of how the possibility of a decent life and a fair society slip and slide away before our eyes. However, the interest was not so much to give free rein to ominous visions of the future but to investigate on how not to resign ourselves to the role of the doomsayer but to intervene in what Oliver Coutard and Simon Guy (2007) have designated as a more hopeful research practice.

Prototyping. Now we want to come back to our title and the suggestion what we want to think through: the experimental dimension of the Spanish STS network as an exercise in prototyping. Prototypes have acquired certain prominence and visibility in contrast with the figuration of the model recently. Prototypes have become a trope for description in art-technology contexts, where the emphasis is on the productive and processual aspects of experimentation. Medialabs, hacklabs, community and social art collectives are spaces where prototyping and experimentation have taken hold as both modes for knowledge-production and cultural and sociological styles of interaction. Software development is perhaps the most well-known case, where the release of non-stable versions of software, open to tinkering, have become commonplace, as is famously the case in free and open source software.

From a historical and sociological angle, the backdrop of such practices of prototyping is not infrequently connected, if in complex and not always obvious ways, with the do-it-yourself, environmental, and recycling movements of the 1980's and 1990's. What would then be prototyping an academic network? We don't really know but we have decided to explore it through the figure of openness and experimentation: opening spaces of dialogue with other actors and institutions outside the academic environment; experimenting with our academic modalities of rationality and their spatial organization.

One last word: Remembering the debates of our second encounter on **“Disillusion and hope”** allow us to finish with a reflection: if hope can be defined as a way for opening up new futures and our aim is to sustain the openness of the network, perhaps we could say that prototyping an open network is nothing but bringing into life the conditions of possibility for a more hopeful research practice.

References:

Coutard, O., & Guy, S. (2007). “STS and the City. Politics and Practices of Hope”. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 32(6), 713-734.